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ADVENTIST WOMEN CLERGY: THEIR CALL AND EXPERIENCES (PART II)

Abstract: This article describes “what happened” to the female pastors whose ministry experiences were reported in the previous *JACL* issue. Today, only one remains in pastoral ministry. Others are experiencing their “call” in new situations or are retired. They describe challenges related to gender as well as supports. Ordination did not dominate the interviews although the women were clearly disappointed by the vote against ordination of women in pastoral ministry at the General Conference session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in July 2015.

Keywords: *Female clergy, Seventh-day Adventist, pastoral calling, staying in ministry*

Introduction

Twelve years ago I conducted a study of 11 Seventh-day Adventist women pastors in the United States, inquiring about their experiences in ministry. At that time, all were fully qualified as pastors (had seminary training), were employed full time by local conferences, and had served a minimum of 10 years. Together they had served as church pastors for over 150 years (Bumgardner, 2005). The results of that study were shared in the previous issue of *JACL*, highlighting their call to ministry, their mentors, their experiences as mothers, challenges they faced, and why they chose to stay in pastoral ministry (Bumgardner, 2015).

Over the years, I have wondered what happened to them. Their longevity in ministry in the first study highlighted their call and commitment to ministry. Did they stay in ministry? Where were they now? In the summer of 2015, I began my efforts to “find” and interview the same female pastors. I was able to find nine of the eleven women. Since the first study, these women have served over 75 additional years as pastors, representing a collective total of over 225 years of ministry. The purpose of this article is to report the findings of my second interviews with these pastors. As the results of this follow up are shared, many of the details are generalized in order to protect the identity of

the women. In addition, as in the original study, the common experiences of the women are blended to aid in preserving their anonymity.

Following Their Call

In the original study, the two strongest reasons these pastors had stayed in ministry for so many years were the strength of their call from God and the difference their ministry made in the lives of people. However, only one woman presently serves as a full-time pastor, two are retired, and six continue denominational employment in positions other than as full-time pastors. Two of these women serve a more limited role as pastors in addition to their denominational employment. Their new roles include working for all age groups, serving individuals who are experiencing health challenges and loss, leadership positions, and advocacy. In this follow-up study, a strong majority of the women continue to view themselves as pastors and find fulfillment in their revised and expanded view of their call to ministry. Helen reflects on her situation:

While it seems to some that I have stepped out of pastoral ministry, my work is still that of a pastor. I counsel people daily, develop ministries for our community, periodically preach, and recently baptized a young person whose family I have known for many years.

Gail shares that “as I considered leaving local church ministry, people who encouraged me to accept the new position told me, ‘You will bring the heart of a pastor to the job.’” Ann describes the greatest compliment she hears in her new role: “You are still a pastor to us.” Most of these women have entered more specialized ministries outside the local church and see the people they now serve as their “parishioners.” They experience God’s leading and blessing in their new roles and ministries. Margaret’s words summarize the experience of many: “All I have done in the past, my work, my training and my education, have come together. I’m in the center of what God designed me to be.”

In their new roles in ministry, these women find continued joy in making a difference in the lives of those they serve. The settings are varied, the individuals and groups they serve diverse. They serve pastors and teachers, children and adults, the sick and bereaved, the marginalized and voiceless, and in both local and global settings. Their thoughts on their current situations are varied.

Susan, the one pastor who remains serving in a local church, shares how she nearly gave it up, too:

I have just a few more years and I will retire! In fact I’m pretty tired and would like to stop sooner. But this is my calling, even with difficulties and problems. I wanted to leave after a particularly difficult time about 10 years ago. The experience was traumatic spiritually, physically and emotionally. But when a new pastor came, I found healing through him; he was so supportive and thankful for my ministry. I realized you can go through a major crisis and still survive.

Gail works full-time for the Adventist Church, and part of her time she also serves as a pastor. “I would love to discontinue the church part of my work and do full-time ministry in a different setting,” she says. “However, for now that’s not possible. I love the portion of my ministry that is directed to ministering to individuals, so I will stay for another few years.” Ann describes the timeliness of her transition out of pastoral ministry. “Things at the church were going very well,” she says. “However, some leaders were negative and beginning to fight against what I saw as God’s intention for the church. It became a very difficult. So, I realized it was time for me to go. I did my best.”

Margaret, whose story in the original study was one of the most challenging, described her transition as filled with heartache:

The church I left was the most positive experience in ministry of all the churches I served. When I finally decided to make the transition to another position I didn’t like it, but I finally felt at peace. While earlier in my ministry I had thoughts of leaving, I had gotten to the place where I’m not looking to leave.

Elizabeth’s experience, however, is less positive:

My current position is filled with stress and I am in the process of writing a letter asking if they want a letter of resignation. During the past year I have felt eyes on me and I wonder if they want me. I ask myself, “Why am I here?” We’ll see where it goes.

Jacqueline retired several months ago. “I would have stayed except the lead pastor retired,” she says. “I knew we would be entering into a search and all that comes with that transition. I thought, ‘I don’t want to go through another pastoral change.’” As she looks ahead in her retirement, she anticipates some continuing education that will open opportunities for a new avenue of ministry to individuals. Alice also retired within the past year. She, too, is planning to continue in ministry in a different setting: “I loved pastoral ministry. However, I found the politics in the local church and conference to be draining. God is opening avenues for me to continue to serve in a different setting.”

Helen reflects about her ministry:

I’m still obsessed with church. . . . That’s my passion. Although, if I ever got asked to be a church pastor again, would I do it? I’m happy right now. And I love pastoral ministry. Part of me would like to try it again. However, it doesn’t bother me. I lift it up and ask God if this will be part of his plan. Or will I do something else entirely? Who knows? I never imagined the career variety I’ve had.

Cynthia, who found that the biggest struggle for her in coming to her new position was leaving a parish pastor position, says, “I began to see that in my new role I would continue to be a pastor; just the setting would change.” In fact, a common theme in the stories of those who are no longer in full-time

ministry is that they continue to see themselves as pastors in their new settings. With a catch in her voice, Jacqueline says, “I’m supporting front line workers in their ministry. To me this is the greatest ministry God has given to me. I feel very humbled by that.”

The retirees are also continuing in ministry. Both talk about the decision to retire as coming at the right time; however, they also acknowledge that they might have stayed longer if circumstances had been different. While they believe God’s leading in their transitions to new avenues of service, they strongly retain their pastoral identity. Several implied the possibility that they might have continued as pastors if circumstances had been less stressful, and if they had received greater support. But Susan raises another possibility:

Is it possible that God opened the door to this new ministry because I was headed toward too much hurt and discouragement if I had stayed as a pastor? I’ll never know the answer to that question. But I do wonder.

Some of the women described how they function in their new situations. When her school faced an emergency, Alice recognized the voice of God in the moment a decision was needed. While others hesitated, she stated to the group, “No. We should take action now.” In the interview, she reflected: “I don’t know where that came from. However, it was the right decision. After that everyone moved ahead. I was able to provide necessary leadership because earlier I took time to build trust with the staff.”

Another woman, Susan, sees herself as bringing a personal touch to her work setting. “If I can treat people kindly and give them a positive boost, then I’ve accomplished what I need to,” she says. “It may not be Bible studies, but if I can make positive impact, I want to do that.”

The global reach of some women can be seen in the words of Cynthia: “I am teaching men and some women from all over the world. I’ve never traveled so much, preaching and sharing what God has given me.”

Several women also find themselves serving as role models and mentors, as Gail describes:

I sometimes find myself in the position of being the “go to” person for guidance to younger pastors, both men and women. In addition, there are women in the church for whom I model how to balance a career, family, and spiritual life. While I don’t always keep that balance well, women tell me they are encouraged in their own lives.

Finally, Ann summarizes well the experiences of many of the women: “If I’m in the place God wants me to be, then God gives me the wisdom and understanding to be the best listener, advisor, comforter and whatever else He asks of me. At that moment it’s just up to God.”

Supports

As in the previous study, the women find support from male colleagues and, for those who are married, from their husbands. “I am the only woman in a small group of clergy in my area,” says Margaret. “They are part of my ‘family.’ I feel they are people I can call on at any time.” Jacqueline echoes Margaret in acknowledging the supportive men she worked with: “One colleague, a profound and godly man, affirmed me and was never threatened by my ministry. And when needed, he goes to my male colleagues and reminds them to provide support for my ministry.”

Indeed, the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (NAD) provided strong support for a majority of the women, especially seen in their actions on behalf of women before and after the 2015 General Conference session at which the full inclusion and recognition of women clergy was debated and then voted down. “I am still impressed with the NAD’s actions on behalf of women,” states Gail. “And I see Dan Jackson, NAD President, as a phenomenal leader. He exhibits courage, firmness, and integrity.”

Speaking of backing from much closer quarters, Alice praises her husband: “He has always been and always will be my biggest supporter.”

Challenges Related to Gender

The views of the majority of the women in this study regarding gender are summed up best by Ann:

A lot of people believe the biggest issue for women in ministry is the lack of ordination. However, in my experience it is the day-to-day inequities and lack of sensitivity to gender-related differences. Some of that is sexism that no one realizes.

Expanding on Ann’s statement, Susan addresses the situation this way:

There is no question that ministry is a difficult and challenging profession for both men and women. However, it is also true that women experience challenges that are unique and directly tied to our gender. That adds an additional burden in ministry that is simply not there for our male colleagues.

Several women spoke about male colleagues who act threatened by or ambivalent toward their leadership. Margaret describes her experience:

The male leaders I work with see me as competitive. I’m not competitive at all. I don’t want their job to save my soul. How can I be a threat? I’m female, so it’s just bizarre. I don’t get it at all.

Alice, too, is forthright in her portrayal of her male colleagues’ actions:

[It is] the good old boy system. The men I work with will deny it to the day they die. Yet their actions speak louder than their words. They plan the work in our church when I am not present. They make decisions and do not include me in the discussion.

A strong majority of the women spoke of being “invisible” and yet subject to “exposure” when they gather with male colleagues. “I felt that as a woman my voice wasn’t heard,” says Cynthia. “In staff meetings I would suggest something and my idea would be ignored. However, when a male colleague would say the same thing, everyone would be all over it. And I experienced that a lot!” Gail deals with such treatment this way: “I just don’t say anything anymore. I haven’t for years. When I speak all eyes are on me. And not in a good way.” Another woman, Jacqueline, says, “I get dismissed and disregarded when discussing issues of importance. What can I do to make things better? I’m not sure there’s anything.” Ann’s comments are similar: “If you ask, I try to be honest. Yet it seems I need to be more filtered because they don’t really want to hear what I say. Even when they ask.” Yet even when her feedback is accurate, Ann explains, they deny the truth of what she’s said.

The women also described times in which rather than being invisible they would be singled out. Cynthia captures these occurrences:

When we were gathered for pastors’ meetings they would begin statements with “now men, and you, Cynthia,” followed by a laugh. This would happen every time I went to conference meetings. They said, “OK, men; oh, and you, Cynthia.” Year after year. I was being singled out. “Make sure your wives know. Cynthia, that would include your husband.” It got so tiring.

Helen, on the other hand, chose to bring attention to herself:

When I went to pastors’ meetings I wouldn’t sit in the back. I wanted presenters to see me, knowing it would affect their language. I hoped they would use gender inclusive language. However, many times I was ignored and the language didn’t change.

Some of the women described actions by leadership that they believe also adversely affected some men. But even in these instances, the consequences for the women can be more significant because of their gender. Gail was being considered for a church position where she would have been a “perfect match.” However, when the church board found out that the conference wanted to place a woman as their pastor, they reacted against it. “I called the senior pastor to find out what was happening,” Gail explains. “He told me the conference had withdrawn the invitation instead of standing up for her with the church board.” As her conference continued to attempt to find a position for her, a similar response to the proposal of her name resulted in two additional rejections. “There are three examples of my having opportunities sabotaged because of being a woman,” concludes Gail. Other women shared similar difficulties in pastoral placement when they desired a change. In one instance, the challenge in placement resulted in an extended forced sabbatical until the woman was successfully placed in a pastorate.

It is no surprise that these women can feel isolated. “I am far away from the areas where I hear of strong support on behalf of women,” says Helen. “While the leadership in my region verbalizes their support of women in ministry, their actions do not match their words. It’s as if I’m not here.” These and other experiences leave these women feeling, in their words, “rejected,” “betrayed,” “abandoned,” “disrespected,” and “isolated.”

Another challenge women describe is when men do not stand up for women when they face prejudice and discrimination because of their gender.

Jacqueline had an experience similar to Gail’s: “I was told by the conference about an opportunity for a leadership position that matched my gifts. When my name was challenged because of my gender, they withdrew the invitation instead of standing up for me.” Susan sees similar actions: “Leadership in my conference is verbally supportive of women. Yet I’m mystified when they push for the full inclusion of women, yet don’t act.”

Two women experienced a diminishment of their pastoral role by both conference and local leadership in the years after the original study. Elizabeth described her experience:

I was being moved out more and more. It was so blatant that my graduate school academic advisor has been sending job possibilities my way. She said to me, “You have so much more talent that these people are giving you credit for.” I’m so discouraged I’ve been wondering if it’s time to leave.

Helen, too, found her responsibilities being diminished, a change she attributed to her male colleagues’ feelings of discomfort with her competence:

One of our church leaders said to me, “You have greater experience and education than the men at our church. You work harder and they are threatened by your abilities.” I had never thought about it in that way before.

Surprisingly, on one occasion the diminishment of Helen’s role came from another female pastor:

I have been specifically called to ministry to women and children. Mary once said to me, “I don’t want to be a children’s pastor. I just want to be a pastor.” It seemed that Mary believed being “a pastor” was better than a specialized ministry. Some women pastors need to understand, when God calls you, no matter what it might be, that’s where you need to serve. If God calls you to be a theologian or a preacher, you should do that. However, all ministry is just as valid as serving as a senior pastor, worship pastor or whatever ministry you are called to. No ministry to which you are called is “better” than another.

These women want to be known as pastors—not “women pastors.” Alice put it this way:

I wanted to pull my own weight on our staff. I didn’t want to be known

for being good as a woman. I wanted it just to be, “You’re doing well as a pastor.” I wanted to be a minister. Not a woman minister.

Several women, including some who didn’t want to be seen as the “woman pastor,” identified ways in which gender differences and the gender expectations of others impact their ministry. “I brought a good skill set; however, at first I didn’t see myself able to fulfill this new role,” Susan says of beginning in a new ministry position. “It’s the typical woman thing. ‘I can’t do that because I don’t know how to do that.’ Men never say that.”

Ann voiced a practical view of different expectations for women:

The men I’ve worked with have minimal preparation when they get up on Sabbath. They shower, comb their hair, put on a suit. I get up and style my hair, put on makeup, and make sure I’m wearing “proper clothes”: check my hem length, top not too tight, comfortable shoes so I can walk up on the platform easily. I’ve had church members talk about these things! I want to be professional. And I don’t want my clothing to distract from my message. How do I do that?”

Margaret, however, brings a different perspective:

It’s OK to be a woman pastor. You’re bringing things to the game that men can’t bring. And it’s OK to take maternity leave. And it’s OK to say, “No, I’m not going to be in charge of potluck because I’m preaching that week.” It’s OK to enjoy baby showers; also to say, “I don’t have time for that.” I wish I hadn’t downplayed the woman part so much.

Gail may speak for most of the women in the study when she describes the burden of carrying “a mantle that makes women clergy look good”:

If we don’t make women look good, then people won’t want more women in ministry. I’ve also thought of all the little girls that see me as a woman in ministry. I feel such pride and responsibility in that role.

Many also described the reality that, fair or not, women in ministry must work harder than men in order to be accepted. Helen found the senior pastor she worked with sensitive to this challenge. “Pastor Jim will be very up front with you that the demands on female pastors are greater than on male pastors,” she says. “He sees and knows that. If I talk to him, he listens and will try to equalize things.” Susan describes her experience with the unequal expectations:

I have a really strong work ethic. I work hard. I’m very tired. I’m exhausted. I feel, as a female, more is required of me than is expected of men. That’s something hard to describe and what will you do about it? It’s part of the ministry issue of being female.

The women don’t want to be treated differently, yet they describe differences that enter into ministry because of their gender. Unfortunately, the ministry model that leaders and church members have does not take into account the differences and unique challenges women bring to ministry. Alice

sums up the issue well: “I have worked with a number of men that preach about the equality and value of women pastors. However, they don’t treat me as of equal value when we work side-by-side on a daily basis.”

Ordination

The topic of ordination did not dominate the interviews, yet the responses to the ordination discussion and vote at the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference session in July 2015 were strong. Some women believed the resolution to allow each Division of the church to decide whether women would be ordained in their territory would pass. An equal number believed it would be defeated. Whatever their position prior to the vote, these words describe the responses after the results were announced. “I have never experienced a sense of despair more profoundly than I did that day. It was a devastating blow.” “Why are we treated like this?” “I cried. I didn’t expect to be that upset and hurt.” “I had a mingling of emotions: disappointment and elation at how many were supportive.” “It was extremely, emotionally devastating.” “What happened in San Antonio was pretty sad. I started crying. I didn’t realize how deeply it would impact me.” “I was totally caught off guard. I’m surprised at how devastated I was.” “I did not expect it to pass; however, I also did not expect the tears and intense disappointment that followed.”

Keep in mind that these women have served the church as pastors for more than 225 years without the NAD or General Conference recognizing them through ordination. While disappointed, they do not express any change in their commitment to serve. “It sends a message that you and your ministry are not valued,” stated Jacqueline. Ann added, “Yet ministry goes on and this is what I must be doing. Regardless of the vote, we have to go forward.” Helen viewed it this way: “When church leadership said they would do what they can for change; that brought healing to my heart.”

Attitudes Toward Church Leadership

In the years since the first study, there has been a shift in the women’s views of church leadership. While the challenges with leadership in the first study were identified with individuals from whom they experienced discriminatory behavior, in this follow-up they now identify the church structure as the source of challenge. Susan speaks to the larger issues identified by a strong majority of the women:

It’s the politics. Leaders are unwilling to do what was right in regard to marginalization of women. There are horrible things going on. I see the denomination as structurally abusive and designed to marginalize people and put them down, especially women.

Gail cited a specific example:

The conference supported women in ministry; however, some conservative churches in the conference wouldn't even let women on the platform. Why couldn't the president of the conference be more pro-active in saying, "You can't do this"? But the conference didn't.

Ann described the church organizational structure as "from the 1900s, and no one is willing to touch it. We don't know how to change."

Margaret experienced a series of personal and church crises. "I loved the conference guys," she says. "When I went down to meet with them, they were caring and compassionate. However, I never had any follow up from them.

Good men, but not cutting edge when it comes to the needs of women."

Elizabeth was blunt and to the point: "Church leaders need to speak well of those whom God has called—whether males or females." She then went on to state, "I do think change is happening. Sometimes it doesn't happen as rapidly as we want it. We cannot deny there is change on the horizon."

The women in the study do not want lip service; they want to see positive change. Alice puts it this way:

I would like to see more action in conferences and unions saying, "This has got to change; we can't accept this." That has got to happen for us to feel that things are really going to be different. But I think we've gone backwards. I hear from the conference, "Love you. We're so glad you're here." Not much else.

Final Thoughts and Questions

As I reflect on the experiences of these pastors, I see women who have contributed substantially to the Seventh-day Adventist church as sole pastors of a congregation, senior pastors in a multi-staff setting, and organizational leaders. They have served with courage and resilience as they follow their call and serve in a system and with individuals where they have been "hurt," "betrayed," "diminished," and "controlled." Their commitment and loyalty has come with a cost. Over their years of ministry they have stayed faithful to the call of God, even as men with whom they have worked are oblivious to their challenges. Even more concerning are the stories of being treated with hostility. Yet they see God as faithful and opening doors where their gifts can be more fully utilized and affirmed.

When I asked what biblical woman most inspired them, four identified Esther, the Old Testament queen, when she responded to Mordecai's plea to come to the aid of her people. Reflecting Mordecai's message to Esther—"And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esth. 4:14, ESV)—Helen said, "Wherever God puts me, I'm there to fulfill God's purpose for me. You come to your job, your position for such a time as

this.” Two other women singled out Deborah, a prophetess and judge. (See Judg. 4:4.) “Deborah showed strength to do what needed to be done at a time when God needed her to take a strong stand,” reflected Ann. “She was bold and humble at the same time.”

Several women alluded to the consequences of their staying in ministry for so many years. As they spoke I heard hints of depression, burnout, and “compassion fatigue.” It is impossible through this article to convey the passion, anger, sadness, and frustration evident as we talked. In addition, the intensity and specific details of their experiences, which would clarify the depth of their challenges, cannot be fully shared without compromising their anonymity.

When considering why women leave full-time pastoral ministry, one church administrator shared that it is not uncommon for pastors, both male and female, to leave pastoral positions within the first five years of employment. This does not hold true for any of the original 11 women, as at that time all had served as full-time pastors at least 10 years. In addition, some women are thought to leave in order to bear and raise children. Again, this is not an accurate conclusion about the 11 women in these studies. Ten of the women raised children while they served as pastors. Five of them continued their ministries as they bore and raised eight children (collectively), sometimes with minimal maternity leave.

The experiences shared in these interviews leave me wondering about the future of women clergy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the 12 years between the interviews, a number of the women, although continuing to be hopeful for change in the attitudes toward them, do not find sustained progress toward acceptance and equality. Looking at the demographics of the group, this is especially true of those women who serve in settings in which they are distant from other women pastors. “When it comes to acceptance of us, things don’t feel very different,” says Gail. “In fact, I think we’ve gone backwards.”

As I consider the future of women in ministry in the Adventist Church, the experiences of these pastors raise a number of questions. As women are called by God and hired to serve in pastoral ministry, how will administrators and male pastors be prepared to receive them? What will be done to raise their awareness of gender differences in ministry? While the women in this study downplay gender differences, they do acknowledge ways in which they function differently than their male colleagues. The question of gender differences is complicated. However, some studies of female clergy identify women as less hierarchical, more committed to relationships, and less willing to utilize power, while showing that men prefer a more rational approach to decision-making (Frame & Shehan, 2004; Lehman, 1993; Nason-Clark, 1987; Stevens,

1989; Zikmund, Lummis, & Chang, 1998). Further discussion of studies of gender differences can be found in Bumgardner (2005).

Additional studies find women to value connectedness, collaboration with others, and sharing power and leadership broadly (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Cantor & Bernay, 1992; Helgesen, 1990, 1995; Miller, 1976; Regan & Brooks, 1995). These studies raise the question of how women clergy can thrive in a church system built on a hierarchical model. What can be done to “flatten the structure,” as Elizabeth suggested?

When assured of anonymity, the candor with which these women share details of difficult experiences and make strong assessments of discriminatory practices raises the question of where women in ministry can find support. As long as they see that male colleagues and church administrators who overtly support women are nevertheless insensitive to their challenges, whom will they turn to for a listening ear or counsel? Susan described the leaders of her conference this way:

They constantly tell me I can turn to them, yet when I do, they are tone deaf. I recently heard that a male colleague went to them about me. While they listened carefully to his concerns, no one came to me to ask my perspective. They took action based only on his report. Where is the justice in that?

It can be difficult to share the challenges of ministry with those to whom they are accountable.

Recommendations

Among many recommendations that come to mind, three rise above all others. The first is the need for widespread education of gender differences and approaches to ministry. While not overtly stated, several women seemed to imply that the model of what a “good pastor” looks like does not take into account the differences women bring to ministry. How can the diversity in approach and leadership that women bring to ministry be incorporated if the differences are not acknowledged and understood? This education is needed at all levels of the church structure, especially among those who work most closely with women.

Secondly, if the church wants more women to enter and stay in ministry, it is vital that support for women be based on what they identify as their needs, not what others assume to be true for them. Unquestionably, it takes time to listen and learn, and church leaders are busy. A strong majority of the women in these studies identified gender-based challenges with little support. It seems that ongoing conversations with women in ministry would yield significant benefits.

Finally, there is a need for additional research in which the identity of the

women interviewed is closely guarded. At various times during our conversations, the women in these studies wanted reassurance that their anonymity would be protected. They described fear of reprisal if they were identified. Additional studies could include women's attempts to find employment as pastors after completing their theological training, the experiences of women who entered ministry more recently, and male pastors' experiences of working alongside women in ministry.

Many stories remain to be heard as women continue to follow God's calling.

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